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ABSTRACT

This digest describes the use of thematic, communicative language teaching in the K-8 foreign language classroom. Such theme-based curricula can reinforce or extend the content of the regular classroom curriculum and give coherence to language lessons. Themes for curriculum units can be derived from many sources. Teachers should choose themes that lend themselves to teaching language that will be useful to their students. A focus on communication, including the interactions present in all uses of the language, is essential. Three thematic units are provided in the digest for illustration: a second-grade French class "visiting the farm"; a German fairy tale for third-grade students; and the South American Rain Forest for a fifth-grade Spanish class. (VWL)

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Foreign language instruction for children can be enriched when teachers use thematic units that focus on content-area information, engage students in activities in which they must think critically, and provide opportunities for students to use the target language in meaningful contexts and in new and complex ways. The national standards for foreign language teaching and learning support this approach to language instruction (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996).

According to the standards, when teachers plan lessons they should focus on the five Cs of Communication, Culture, Connections with other disciplines, Comparisons with students' native languages and cultures, and use of the foreign language in Communities outside the classroom. Increasingly, foreign language educators are integrating the five Cs of the standards into "content-related" (Curtain & Pesola, 1994) or "theme-based" (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) curricula. These curricula reinforce or extend the content of the regular classroom curriculum to give coherence to the language lessons. A unit on the solar system, for example, might include vocabulary that describes the attributes of the planets, which students are also learning about in English. Students might also listen to and recite a poem about the moon and the stars, compare the view of the "rabbit in the moon" found in Aztec and Asian cultures to the North American view of the "man in the moon," observe the night sky (phases of the moon and star constellations) in their area at different times of the year, and compare their observations with those of students in other parts of the world through email exchanges in the target language.

Planning Thematic Units

Themes for curriculum units can be derived from many sources. Planning thematic units allows the teacher to incorporate a variety of language concepts into a topic area that is interesting and worthy of study and that gives students a reason to use the language. Teachers should choose themes that lend themselves to teaching language that will be useful for their students. Themes and lessons should integrate language, content, and culture into activities that allow students to practice the foreign language and that prepare them to use it in a variety of contexts. A focus on communication, including the interactions present in all uses of the language (for speaking, listening, reading, and writing) is essential. Students need to be able to interpret the language, express themselves in the language, and negotiate meaning in the language (Savignon, 1997).

In beginning communicative language classes, the teacher's role includes introducing vocabulary and phrases and providing comprehensible language input for the students. Visuals and manipulatives, gestures, sounds, and actions all help students understand the new vocabulary and structures. Students need opportunities to be active participants in tasks that require them to negotiate meaning and practice language in communication with their teacher, their peers, and others.

Pesola (1995) developed the Framework for Curriculum Development for FLES programs, which begins with a thematic center and creates a dynamic relationship among the factors that teachers must take into account: language in use, subject content, and culture. (See also Curtain & Pesola, 1994, for a detailed description of the framework.) The framework highlights a set of questions to guide curriculum planning:

- Who are the students in terms of learner characteristics, such as developmental level, learning style, and experiential background?
- What are the planned activities, and how will teachers assess students' performance?
- How will the classroom setting affect the planned activities?
- What materials do teachers need to support the activities?
- What language functions, vocabulary, and grammatical structures will students practice through the activities?
- What knowledge about subject content and culture will the students gain?

Examples of Thematic Units

Three thematic units—Visiting the Farm, A German Fairy Tale, and The South American Rainforest—are described below. They were developed by teachers who used Pesola's framework to guide their planning process. In each of these units, the teachers created language immersion settings in their classrooms, planned lessons around themes that were interesting to the students, asked the students to think critically, reinforced concepts and skills from the regular classroom, integrated culture, and gave students many opportunities to use the target language in a variety of situations (Haas, 1999).

Visiting the Farm

Martine's second-grade French class focused on the farm for 4 weeks. The class began each day with an activity that reviewed previously learned language. For example, one student would make an animal sound and call on another student to say the name of the animal. As the students moved from activity to activity, Martine gave them short time limits for specific tasks to be completed on their own or in pairs or small groups. The students used French as they manipulated pictures and completed assigned tasks. Activities included brainstorming a list of names of farm animals in French that students already knew, learning new animal names in French, and drawing a farm mural on butcher paper; singing a song about animals in the barnyard (*Dans la basse cour*); comparing barns in France and the United States; planting two types of vegetables chosen from seed packets of common French vegetables; measuring and charting the plants' growth; tasting radishes with butter (as they are served in France); creating a labeled farm page for their book of all of the places they "visited" in class that year; sorting food by plant or animal and completing and describing a food pyramid; making baguette sandwiches; comparing with a partner pictures of vocabulary words (e.g., the animals on their farm pages, their

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favorite foods, the ingredients in their baguette sandwiches) with a partner; listening to the story of the three pigs in French and creating their own versions of the tale (e.g., the three horses and the big, bad, hungry cow), which they acted out; and taking their baguette sandwiches with them to a fantasy picnic on the farm.

A German Fairy Tale

In this 3-week unit, Frederike introduced her third-grade German students to a story based on a Grimm's fairy tale about a pancake (*Pfannkuchen*) by singing the song *"Ich Habe Hunger"* ("I Am Hungry") with them, then preparing batter (measuring in grams) and cooking a pancake in class. Next, pairs of students compared the sentences they had cut apart from mixed-up copies of the recipe and resequenced them in the appropriate order. Throughout the unit, Frederike began each class by telling or retelling part of the pancake story. "The Thick, Fat Pancake" (*"Der Dicke Fette Pfannkuchen"*) is the story of an old woman who bakes a pancake that does not want to be eaten. It jumps out of the pan and rolls through the forest. The pancake's delicious smell attracts one forest animal after another. The names of the animals describe their characteristics, such as Wolf Sharptooth (*Wolf Scharfzahn*) and Rabbit Longears (*Haselongohr*). As the animals tell the pancake to stand still so that they can eat it, each one adds another adjective to describe the pancake: "Thick, fat, dear, sweet, yummy, wonderful, golden, delicious, marvelous pancake, stand still! I want to eat you up!" At this request, the pancake laughs and waves and continues rolling down the hill. Finally, the pancake meets two hungry orphans, jumps into their laps and begs, "Eat me, I will give you strength." The orphans then eat the pancake.

The students practiced new vocabulary by drawing pictures on the board as Frederike recited the scene and by sequencing sentences about the story using sentence strips and a pocket chart. The retellings were never boring and always included student input and probing questions that elicited information about the animals in the fairy tale. With each storytelling, Frederike emphasized different vocabulary or introduced a new animal. She also engaged the students in activities that provided practice in using German:

- copying sentences from the story and illustrating them to create personal storybooks
- listing characteristics of the animals, such as the large, sharp teeth of the wolf
- creating surnames for the animals, like Wolf Sharptooth
- playing "inside outside circles" (Kagan, 1986), with one circle of students asking questions about the story and their partners in the other circle answering
- pretending to become animals and pancakes when the teacher waved her magic wand, then role playing their actions in the story
- singing and dancing the "duck dance" and learning the parts of the animals' bodies
- listing what the animals ate and learning the German words for carnivore, herbivore, and omnivore
- practicing reading the fairy tale to a partner
- selecting roles for a play based on the fairy tale and presenting the play for their parents and the first-grade German students
- reading their illustrated storybooks to the first graders.

The South American Rainforest

"¿Necesitamos los portafolios de español?" (Do we need our Spanish notebooks?) is one of the questions students ask as they prepare for Soledad's fifth-grade Spanish class. Soledad begins the first class of this 6-week unit on the rainforest with a song about the weather and questions about the weather outside. Soon the class is working with maps, first with Soledad asking questions about the location of various rain forests in the world, then with the students in the role of teacher, asking other students questions.

The activities that follow lead students to communicate with each other, practice their Spanish, and focus on vocabulary and structure: locating rainforests on the map using their background knowledge from social studies class; contributing to a written description of rainforests on the overhead projector; reading chorally what they have written; and playing games and singing songs that practice the names of animals and their movements. They also work in small groups to tell each other how to color the different animals, to create sentences about animal pictures, to introduce themselves as an animal to their neighbors, to create a dialog between two animals, to write their animal dialogs on chart paper and to read and role-play them, and to edit the dialogs that they have written. They learn about the layers of the rainforest and where each animal lives, what they eat, and what their body coverings are. They write and record conversations between two animals that incorporate all of the information covered in class. They create the sounds of the rain in the rainforest through claps, snaps, and pounding feet. They write a paragraph about the rainforest and, finally, they make *batidos de mango* (mango shakes).

Conclusion

Although each class is different from the others in content and specific activities, all of the teachers planned interesting thematic units that included daily review of language; rich, comprehensible input in an immersion setting; and opportunities to think critically and to process language and negotiate meaning. They also involved students as active and interactive participants in a variety of activities that reflect the goals of the national standards. Although creating thematic units takes time and effort on the part of the teacher, this way of teaching engages students and provides them with a meaningful and exciting context in which to learn a new language.

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